

Message Text

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 IO-13 NSCE-00 ICAE-00 SSO-00 INRE-00
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O R 161720Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY ROME
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2829
INFO AMCONSUL FLORENCE
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TAGS: PINT, IT
SUBJ: COMMUNIST SETBACK IN ADMINISTRATIVE ELECTIONS

REF: ROME 8826

SUMMARY: ON MAY 14 AND 15, NEARLY TEN PERCENT OF THE
ELECTORATE VOTED FOR NEW LOCAL ADMINISTRATIONS IN 816
COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT ITALY AS WELL AS NEW
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS IN PAVIA AND VITERBO. THE
RESULTS SHOWED GAINS FOR THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS (DC) BUT
STRONGER THAN ANTICIPATED MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, THE COMMUNIST
SHOWING WAS UNEXPECTEDLY WEAK SLIGHTLY OVER 1972
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LOCAL ELECTION RESULTS, BUT A SURPRISING 9 PERCENT UNDER
THE 1976 NATIONAL ELECTION LEVEL). WHILE THE MORO
TRAGEDY AND LAW-AND-ORDER BACKLASH HELPED THE DC,
IT MORE SIGNIFICANTLY WORKED AGAINST THE PCI DESPITE
ITS STRONG STANCE AGAINST TERRORISM. THE ELECTIONS
ALSO PROVIDED INDICATIONS OF A COMEBACK FOR THE SOCIALISTS
AND LAY PARTIES, POSSIBLY ATTENUATING THE TREND TOWARD BI-

POLARIZATION. NOTWITHSTANDING THE EMBITTERED CLIMATE OF TERRORISM AND UNEMPLOYMENT, PARTIES OF THE EXTREME RIGHT OR LEFT FAILED TO ATTRACT VOTERS. WHILE THE PARTIES REGARD THE VOTE AS AN IMPORTANT INDICATOR OF THE POLITICAL BAROMETER, CAUTION SHOULD BE EXERCIZED AGAINST EXAGGERATING THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UNDISPUTED DC VICTORY AND UNEXPECTED PCI SETBACK. THE ABILITY OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTIES TO FORESTALL FURTHER COMMUNIST ADVANCES WILL STILL DEPEND HEAVILY ON THEIR CAPABILITY TO RESOLVE EFFECTIVELY THE SERIOUS SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS CONFRONTING THE COUNTRY. END SUMMARY

1. THE FOLLOWING TABLE ILLUSTRATES FINAL RESULTS FOR THE 261 COMMUNITIES WITH OVER 5000 INHABITANTS WHICH VOTED ON THE PROPORTIONAL ELECTION SYSTEM:

	1978 LOCAL	1972 LOCAL	1976 NATIONAL
DC	42.5	37.5	38.9
PCI	26.5	25.9	35.6
PSI	13.3	13.5	9.2
MSI-DN	5.0	6.8	7.1
PSDI	4.8	6.2	3.3
PLI	1.4	2.3	1.0
PRI	3.2	2.8	2.6
PDUP/DEM.PROL.	0.7	0.1	1.4

(BALANCE: MIXED GROUPS AND SPLINTER PARTIES)
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2. THE DC ALSO PERFORMED WELL IN THE 555 COMMUNITIES BELOW 5000 INHABITANTS WHICH ELECTED NEW ADMINISTRATIONS BY MAJORITY VOTE. COMPARED TO CONTROL OF 264 COMMUNITIES IN 1972, THE DC TOOK COMMAND OF 285 TOWNS IN THE CURRENT TEST. IN CONTRAST, THE PCI SHOWED A DECLINE FROM 26 TO 18. WITH THE PSI TAKING 13 (DOWN) FROM 16) AND THE PSDI 5 (DOWN FROM 14), MIXED AND SPLINTER PARTIES WON IN THE REMAINING CONTESTS.

3. FINALLY, THE DC ALSO SHOWED STRENGTH IN THE ELECTIONS OF NEW PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATIONS IN PAVIA

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AND VITERBO. IN PAVIA THE DC GAINED 5.3 PERCENT OVER 1972
AND 2.3 PERCENT OVER 1976 WHILE THE PCI MAINTAINED ITS 1972
LEVEL BUT DROPPED 4.3 PERCENT FROM 1976. IN VITERBO,
THE DC REGAINED THE RELATIVE MAJORITY OF THE VOTE FROM THE
PCI (37.5 VS. 33.8 PERCENT), REGISTERING GAINS OF 5 POINTS
OVER 1972 BUT 1 PERCENT UNDER 1976. THE PCI DROPPED A POINT
FROM 1972, BUT NEARLY 6 FROM 1976.

4. INTERPRETING THE VOTE. THERE ARE SUFFICIENT VARIABLES
IN LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE CONTESTS TO SUSTAIN VIRTUALLY
ANY THESIS. THE COMMUNISTS, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE
ALREADY SOUGHT TO MINIMIZE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE
VOTE BY ASSERTING THAT THE PCI TRADITIONALLY DOES
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BADLY IN LOCAL TESTS. VOTING HISTORY IN THE LAST
20 YEARS DEMONSTRATES THAT JUST THE REVERSE IS TRUE;
THE DC TRADITIONALLY DOES POORLY IN LOCAL ELECTIONS.
LOCAL ISSUES DO PLAY A ROLE, PARTICULARLY IN THE
SMALLER CONTESTS (THE TOWNS UNDER 5000 INHABITANTS);
THEY MAY EXPLAIN IN PART THE RELATIVELY GOOD SHOWING
OF THE PSI AND LAY PARTIES. HOWEVER, SINCE THE 1975
REGIONAL ELECTIONS, ITALIAN POLLING HAS BECOME
INCREASINGLY INFLUENCED BY NATIONAL ISSUES AND PER-

CEPTIONS. THIS TREND WAS EVIDENT IN LAST YEAR'S MINOR TESTS (SUCH AS CASTALLAMMARE DI STABIA); IT WAS ALL THE MORE PRONOUNCED IN THIS POLLING. AND INDEED, THE PARTIES' PITCH TO THE ELECTORATE DURING THE BRIEF CAMPAIGN WAS ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY CONCENTRATED ON NATIONAL ISSUES. FINALLY, THERE WAS THE UNCERTAIN IMPACT OF THE MORO KIDNAPPING AND MURDER ON AN ELECTORATE WHICH HAD ALREADY SEIZED UPON LAW-AND-ORDERS AS THE PRIMARY ISSUE. WHILE THE RESULTS SHOW THAT THE MORO TRAGEDY HELPED THE DC, PERHAPS EVEN MORE, IT WORKED TO THE DISADVANTAGE OF THE PCI. IN ITS INITIAL ANALYSIS OF THE NOTE, L'UNITA SAID THAT THE TERRORISTS BORE "ECNORMOUS RESPONSIBILITY" WITH "THEIR IMPROPER USE OF THE NAME OF COMMUNISM" BY OFFERING A "PERTEXT TO CONSERVATIVES AND REACTIONARIES" TO ATTACK THE PCI. DESPITE THE PCI'S STRONG LA-AND-ORDER STANCE, LINGERING VOTER IDENTIFICATION OF THE PCI WITH VIOLENCE AND DISORDER SERIOUSLY HARMED THE PARTY'S PERFORMANCE.

5. THE DC GAIN THE PCI LOSS: THE DC HAD EXPECTED TO DO WELL; IT PERFORMED ABOVE EVERYONE'S EXPECTATIONS. ITALIAN ELECTION CHANGES RARELY FLUCTUATE MORE THAN A PERCENTAGE POINT OR TWO. THE DC'S 42.7 PERCENT OF THE VOTE, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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REFLECTING A 3.6 PERCENT GAIN OVER 1972 AND 5 PERCENT RISE OVER 1976 IS THEREFORE IMPRESSIVE AND IS BEING JUDGED BY THE OTHER PARTIES AS SUCH. SIMILARLY, THE PCI'S 9 PERCENT DROP FROM 1976 (EVEN THOUGH IT ROUGHLY HELD ON TO ITS 1972 LEVEL--UP 9.7 PERCENT) CAN ONLY BE REGARDED AS STRIKING IN ITS MAGNITUDE. THE PCI'S POOR RESULTS ARE ALL THE MORE SIGNIFICANT IN VIEW OF THAT PARTY'S STEADY ADVANCES IN ITS ELECTORAL HISTROY--GAINS WHICH FED A WIDELY ACCEPTED VIEW OF PCI INVINCIBILITY AND INEVITABILITY. CONVERSELY, THE DC HAS BEEN ABLE TO SHOW THAT THEY ARE NO LONGER A PARTY OF CONGENITAL LOSERS. AT FIRST GLANCE, THE DC APPEARS TO HAVE PICKED UP STRENGTH FROM THE MSI AND PLI; AS MUCH AS HALF OF ITS INCREASE MAY BE ATTRIBUTED, HOWEVER, TO A RECOVERY OF TRADITIONAL DC VOTERS FROM THE PCI. FINALLY, IT IS WORTH NOTING PCI LOSSES WERE GENERALLY LARGER IN THE SOUTH THAN THE INDUSTRIALIZED NORTH.

6. THE SOCIALISTS AND LAY PARTIES ATTENUATE BIPOLARIZATION TREND. ALTHOUGH THE RESULTS OF THE LAY PARTIES PRESENT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION (LOCAL PERSONALITIES AND ISSUES PLAY A GREATER ROLE), THE POLLING SHOWED A SURPRISING RECOVERY FROM THE 1976 ELECTION DEFEAT BUT A MIXED

PICTURED WHEN COMPARED TO THE 1972 LOCAL TEST. THE SOCIALISTS JUBILANTLY INTERPRET THE RESULTS AS A SIGNIFICANT AUGURY OF A PSI REVIVAL AND VICTORY FOR THE CRAXI AUTONOMIST LINE. THE PRI AND PSDI DEMONSTRATED SIMILAR INDICATIONS OF REVIVED STRENGTH; THE PICTURE IS LESS CLEAR FOR THE SMALL LIBERAL PARTY WHICH RAN ON ITS NEW OPPOSITION PARTY PLATFORM. TO THE EXTENT THAT THE 6.6 PERCENT INCREASE OF THE LAY PARTIES OVER 1976 REPRESENTS AN ATTENUATION OF THE TREND TOWARD BIPOLARIZATION, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THESE GAINS WERE TAKEN MOSTLY OUT OF THE PCI HIDE.

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7. THE EXTREMISTS ARE TROUNCED. IN A CLIMATE EMBITTERED BY TERRORISM, UNEMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL ALIENATION, ONE MIGHT EXPECT EXTREME POLITICAL MOVEMENTS--OF THE RIGHT AND LEFT--TO BENEFIT. THAT THIS DID NOT HAPPEN IS IN A SENSE A TRIBUTE TO THE BALANCE AND EVEN MATURITY OF THE ITALIAN VOTER. THE NEO-FASCIST MSI RECEIVED 4.5 PERCENT OF THE VOTE; ITS BREAKAWAY NATIONAL DEMOCRACY FACTION (DN) GOT BUT

HALF A POINT. TOGETHER, THEY SHOWED A 2.6 PERCENT
DECLINE FROM 1976. WHILE MANY OF THE LEFT GROUPS
DID NOT PRESENT CANDIDATES, THE FEAR THAT THEY WOULD
GAIN AT THE EXPENSE OF THE PCI WAS NOT BORNE OUT.
DP AND PDUP GOT BUT 0.7 PERCENT OF THE VOTE.
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8. A WORD OF CAUTION: THE LOCAL ELECTIONS REPRESENTED
THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT TEST OF THE ELECTORATE SINCE
THE 1976 VOTE AND THE SUBSEQUENT ENTRY OF THE PCI
IN THE GOVERNING AREA. THEY ARE THEREFORE REGARDED
AS AN IMPORTANT INDICATOR OF THE POLITICAL BAROMETER
AND WILL UNDOUBTEDLY INFLUENCE POLITICAL CALCULATIONS
AND STRATEGIES IN THE COMING MONTHS. A DOXA POLL
PROJECTION INTERESTINGLY BEARS OUT THE RESULTS
ON A NATION-WIDE SCALE. DESPITE THE CAUTION THAT MUST BE
EXERCISED IN INTERPRETING THIS KIND OF LOCAL ELECTION, THE
DC'S VICTORY AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE PCI'S POOR SHOWING,
WILL HAVE A SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL IMPACT. THE SAMPLE IS TOO SMALL
TO JUDGE THE EXTENT OF THE PSI AND LAY PARTY RECOVERY WHICH,
IF BORNE OUT IN THE FUTURE, COULD PROVIDE THE BASIS FOR RENEWED
COOPERATION WITH THE DC. OVER THE SHORT TERM, THE MORO
TRAGEDY AND LAW-AND-ORDER BACKLASH HAS BENEFITED
THE DC. OVER THE MEDIUM AND LONGER TERM, HOWEVER,
THE PCI COULD CONTINUE TO BENEFIT POLITICALLY FROM THE
MOUNTING FRUSTRATION OVER THE GOVERNMENT'S INABILITY
TO DETER THE ESCALATION OF TERRORIST VIOLENCE AND
DEFUSE THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC TINDERBOX OF RISING
UNEMPLOYMENT. THUS, IF A CLEAR MAJORITY OF THE
ELECTORATE HAS AGAIN VOICED ITS PREFERENCE FOR THE
NON-COMMUNIST PARTIES, THE ABILITY OF THE DEMOCRATIC
PARTIES TO FORESTALL FURTHER COMMUNIST ADVANCES WILL
STILL DEPEND HEAVILY ON THEIR CAPABILITY TO RESOLVE
EFFECTIVELY THE SERIOUS AND URGENT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC
PROBLEMS CONFRONTING THE COUNTRY. GARDNER

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SAS ID: 2677480
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: COMMUNIST SETBACK IN ADMINISTRATIVE ELECTIONS
TAGS: PINT, IT
To: STATE
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